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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this booklet is to assist the leader, facilitator, or convener of a community group with suggestions to help the group become a more effective decision-making body. The point of view taken in this booklet is that consensus decisions, while difficult to make, are the most likely to be supported and understood by all group members. The characteristics of an effective decision-making group are specified as (1) members will know which decisions are important, (2) members can describe what they need to do to follow up on a decision, (3) members know when a decision is made, and (4) members report a sense of accomplishment. The suggestions in the booklet are intended to help groups develop these characteristics. (Author/MLF)

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Keys to Community Involvement Series

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KEYS TO COMMUNITY INVOLVEMENT

GROUP DECISION MAKING:
STYLES & SUGGESTIONS

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ABOUT THE SERIES

Keys to Community Involvement is a series of booklets developed for governing boards, community leaders, group members, administrators and citizens. The booklets are designed to help these audiences strengthen their skills in group processes, work cooperatively with others, and plan and carry out new projects. Topics include techniques to maintain enthusiasm in a group, ways that agencies can effectively use consultants, and factors that affect introducing and implementing new projects.

The booklets are written by members of the Rural Education Program of the Northwest Regional Educational Laboratory. The Laboratory is a nonprofit, educational research and development corporation, headquartered in Portland, Oregon.

The booklets in the series are adapted from a much more comprehensive set of materials and training activities developed and field tested by the Northwest Regional Educational Laboratory over the past several years in dozens of locations throughout the western United States.

Information about other booklets in this series--titles and how to order--as well as information about related services--training, workshops and consultation--can be found on the inside and outside back covers of this booklet.

This booklet consists of a text and worksheets that you may use with your group. The worksheets appear at the back of the booklet, so that you may copy them to use with your group.

INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this booklet is to assist the leader, facilitator or convener of a community group with suggestions to help the group become a more effective decision-making body.

Rarely does a community group stand up and say, "We don't make decisions well. Can you help us do something about it?" More frequently you see only the symptoms: apathy, lack of followup, lack of accomplishment, feelings of lack of purpose. As a facilitator or chairperson you are forced to guess the cause of these symptoms. Further, many group leaders, especially those who have received some leadership training, have a sense that something called "consensus" is valuable, and that if only the group would use consensus, symptoms such as those described above would disappear.

While it is difficult to define "effective decision making" in a way that everyone would agree with, the following characteristics of an effective decision-making group may be specified:

- members will know which decisions are important
- members can describe what they need to do to follow up on a decision
- members know when a decision is made
- members report a sense of accomplishment

The suggestions found in the remainder of this booklet can help your group develop these characteristics.

COMMON STYLES OF DECISION MAKING

Below are listed eight typical ways in which groups make decisions.

- *Unanimous Consent*--everyone agrees that a proposed course of action is the best choice.
- *Consensus*--everyone agrees to a course of action, even though it may not be everyone's first choice, at least for a specified time period. In a consensus decision, participants agree that they have had sufficient opportunity to state alternatives, and that they will not sabotage the decision.

- *Majority Support*--a majority of those in attendance agree to a course of action; this is often signified by a vote. When the situation is such that no one wants to be publicly associated with a particular position, a secret ballot is taken.
- *Minority Support*--a minority of those in attendance agree to a course of action, while others remain silent. When a decision is made in this fashion, you will often perceive grumbling on the part of those not actively involved in the decision.
- *Handclasp*--one or two members actively support a course of action; on the basis of this support, the course of action is chosen.
- *Topic Jump*--someone shifts the topic before an explicit decision is reached, thus avoiding a decision. A topic jump is one way of making the decision not to decide.
- *Self-Authorization*--a course of action initiated by only one person is adopted with implicit consent or no overt disagreement of other members.
- *"Plop"*--one person initiates action, but the group does not respond one way or another, so no action is taken. This is another way of making the decision not to decide.

ANALYZING YOUR GROUP'S DECISION MAKING

One of the biggest problems facing a group leader is that he or she usually knows more about the decision-making style of a group than the group itself knows. Frequently the group does not wish to know this information, or is threatened by the information, or might develop a sense of inferiority when confronted by it. Thus the first task in improving decision making is for you and the group to gain a shared understanding that decision making needs improvement.

Worksheet #1 (a partially completed sample appears on the following page) is designed to allow you or a group member designated as an observer to tally the types of decisions that are made during a meeting. You can add to the tallying by describing what group members are doing at the time decisions are taken. For example, you can record key words used by participants engaged in making the decision. You might wish to note where the eyes of group members are focused: Are group members looking at each other? At you? At their feet? You may also count the number of persons who participate in decisions and the number of persons who do not. Do the same persons make every decision?

DECISION-MAKING PROCEDURES CHECKLIST

Purpose: To chart the pattern of decision making used by a group.

Procedure: The process observer or another group member tallies the number of times during the meeting that the group uses each kind of decision making. All decisions are included, whether for selecting topics, appointing a recorder, accepting/rejecting a task force report, or closing discussion. Data are fed back to the group as part of the process observation report.

<u>Tally</u>	<u>Kind of Decision Making</u>
<u> 1 </u>	1. Unanimity -- everyone agrees that a proposed course of action is the best choice
<u> </u>	2. Consensus -- everyone agrees, with possible reservations, at least for a specified time period
<u> /// </u>	3. Majority support -- the majority of people agree, often demonstrated by voting
<u> </u>	4. Minority support -- a minority of people agree, with tacit agreement or lack of open disagreement by the remaining members
<u> </u>	5. Handclasp -- one or two members actively support and lead group to action
<u> 1 </u>	6. Topic jump -- the topic shifts before an explicit decision is reached
<u> </u>	7. Self-authorization -- one person initiates action, with implicit consent or no overt disagreement of other members
<u> // </u>	8. Flop -- one person initiates action, but the group does not respond one way or another; by default, no action is taken

Group members all looked at the chairperson when we were voting. Each time we voted, two or three people didn't vote.

Figure 1: Sample Decision-Making Procedures Checklist

If group members report dissatisfaction with what is going on, you may propose gathering data in the manner described on page 4. You should probably be careful not to spring the data on the group without prior agreement to gather and report data.

You may also use data gathered on decision-making styles to plan various activities that might help the group. For example, if one or two persons seem to be doing all the talking as the group is making a decision, you might ask silent members if they agree with the proposed decision.

IMPROVING YOUR GROUP'S DECISION MAKING

There are a number of small things you can do or arrange to have done that can clarify substantially a group's decision-making process. For example, on the agenda for a meeting, all items that require a decision can be identified as such, and differentiated from other items. To do this, simply add a column to the agenda in the following manner:

AGENDA	
<u>Item</u>	<u>Action</u>
1. Welcome, Agenda Review	Information sharing
2. Read minutes from last meeting	Information sharing
3. Select new chairperson	Decision
4. Hear Task Force Report	Decision to adopt or not adopt

Figure 2: Sample Agenda with Action Column

A second thing you can do has to do with the way decisions are recorded. Decisions that are made are typically entered into the minutes or report of a meeting by a secretary or recorder. If, however, you post each decision as it is made on a chart-pak or chalk board, you may find that one or more members will disagree with the decision as you have written it. If you are prepared for this disagreement, the resulting discussion can have the beneficial effect of clarifying for all group members what the decision was. If you use this technique, be careful not to tell whoever disagrees with what you have written that, "You're wrong." Instead, ask him or her to state the decision in his or her own words. In this sort of a discussion, the question of, "How should we make our decisions?" is likely to arise.

Once a group recognizes that it has a problem with decision making, or that it would like to improve its decision making, you can provide the group with information about decision making, and you can assist the group to utilize more skillfully decision-making procedures that are appropriate.

Of the decision-making styles described above, Unanimous Consent, Majority Support, Consensus and the variation of Self-Authorization where the chairperson is stipulated to make the decision, are styles to which procedures can be attached. The others listed describe common circumstances. For example, it is hardly conceivable that "Handclasp" could be organized into a procedure for a group to follow.

Since procedures for voting are well known, and since decisions left to the chairperson are matters of group preference, this handbook will only focus on ways to help a group implement consensus procedures. This is not to say that Majority Support is not a valuable way to make decisions, since at times, it may be the only way. Indeed a

very useful activity for a group is to classify the types of decisions that it normally makes, and then to attach a preferred style (Consensus, Majority Support, etc.) to each type. The following example was taken from an actual group:

<u>Riversdale School Community Action Group</u>	
<u>Type of Decisions We Make</u>	<u>Style of Decision Making We Prefer</u>
Select Chairperson	Secret ballot
Select Secretary	Volunteer
Adopt minutes	Consensus
Adopt task force reports	Consensus
Appoint task force	Volunteer
Make recommendations	Consensus

DECISION BY CONSENSUS

Decision by consensus comes about when the following conditions are met:

- Everyone agrees to support the decision, though it may not be everyone's first choice.
- Everyone agrees that he or she has had sufficient opportunity to influence the decision.
- Everyone can state what the decision is.

It is obvious that consensus decision making is a time-consuming and sometimes tedious process. But it also has the advantage of building group cohesion, and it minimizes the risk of one or two persons actively sabotaging the decision. Thus, while it might take the most time, it offers the highest potential of success.

The biggest pitfall in attempting to utilize decision by consensus is that a group leader will say, "Do we have consensus?", and when no one responds, the group leader then assumes that there is consensus. Actually there has been no consensus at all--only group members refusing to participate in the decision. A consensus decision is always one in which all group members actively participate.

The following procedures are designed to promote successful decision making by consensus:

- A person states the decision that is proposed.
- Someone offers a paraphrase of the decision, that is, puts the decision in his or her own words.
- The person proposing the decision judges the accuracy of the paraphrase. If it is inaccurate, repeat the process.
- If the paraphrase is accurate, the person proposing the decision or the chairperson asks each group member, in turn, to state whether or not he or she can support the decision, and if not, to state an alternative, if he or she wishes.
- If all persons agree to support the decision, consensus exists. At this point, the decision is made official either by voting or by having group members make some visible sign, such as raising their thumbs, that they support the decision and accept the conditions of consensus.

- If one or more persons do not agree to support the decision, but offer alternatives, test each alternative by asking each group member whether or not he or she can support it.
- If consensus cannot be reached on existing alternatives, ask if there are other alternatives that anyone can suggest.
- If no alternative can be found upon which consensus can be reached, try to locate reasons (for example, lack of information, inappropriate time to make the decision, etc.) why persons are unwilling to reach consensus.
- If consensus is not reached, set a time at a later meeting to attempt to make the decision.

These procedures are reproduced in *Worksheet #2* at the end of this booklet, so that you may, if you wish, reproduce and distribute them to all group members.

SUMMARY

The point of view taken in this booklet is that consensus decisions, while difficult to make, are the most likely to be supported and understood by all group members. Of course some decisions will simply not be important enough to be worth the effort it takes to reach consensus, but it is still important to be clear about the style of decision making that is being used.

The first few times you and your group attempt consensus decision making, you may find it frustrating. But if you have patience, you will surely gain the practice you need to make it work. And your group will be making decisions that work.

WORKSHEET #1

DECISION-MAKING PROCEDURES CHECKLIST

Purpose: To chart the pattern of decision making used by a group.

Procedure: The process observer or another group member tallies the number of times during the meeting that the group uses each kind of decision making. All decisions are included, whether for selecting topics, appointing a recorder, accepting/rejecting a task force report, or closing discussion. Data are fed back to the group as part of the process observation report.

Tally Kind of Decision Making

- _____ 1. Unanimity -- everyone agrees that a proposed course of action is the best choice
- _____ 2. Consensus -- everyone agrees, with possible reservations, at least for a specified time period
- _____ 3. Majority support -- the majority of people agree, often demonstrated by voting
- _____ 4. Minority support -- a minority of people agree, with tacit agreement or lack of open disagreement by the remaining members
- _____ 5. Handclasp -- one or two members actively support and lead group to action
- _____ 6. Topic jump -- the topic shifts before an explicit decision is reached
- _____ 7. Self-authorization -- one person initiates action, with implicit consent or no overt disagreement of other members
- _____ 8. Flop -- one person initiates action, but the group does not respond one way or another; by default, no action is taken

WORKSHEET #2

Procedures for Decision by Consensus

1. A person states the decision that is proposed.
2. Someone offers a paraphrase of the decision, that is, puts the decision in his or her own words.
3. The person proposing the decision judges the accuracy of the paraphrase. If it is inaccurate, repeat the process.
4. If the paraphrase is accurate, the person proposing the decision or the chairperson asks each group member, in turn, to state whether or not he or she can support the decision, and if not, to state an alternative, if he or she wishes.
5. If all persons agree to support the decision, consensus exists, and the decision is made.
6. If one or more persons do not agree to support the decision, but offer alternatives, test each alternative by asking each group member whether or not he or she can support it. At this point, the decision is made official either by voting or by having group members make some visible sign, such as raising their thumbs, that they support the decision and accept the conditions of consensus.
7. If consensus cannot be reached on existing alternatives, ask if there are other alternatives that anyone can suggest.
8. If no alternative can be found upon which consensus can be reached, try to locate reasons (for example, lack of information, inappropriate time to make the decision, etc.) why persons are unwilling to reach consensus.
9. If consensus is not reached, set a new time to attempt to make the decision.

CONDITIONS OF CONSENSUS

- Everyone agrees to support the decision, though it may not be everyone's first choice.
- Everyone agrees that he or she has had sufficient opportunity to influence the decision.
- Everyone can state what the decision is.

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